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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses three related studies conducted in California in the mid-1960s that investigated factors related to incumbent defeat in school board of elections and turnover in the school superintendency. The first study dealt with turnover in the superintendency subsequent to defeat of a single incumbent board member; a significant relationship was found between incumbent defeat and involuntary turnover in the superintendency. The second study focused on the selection of new superintendents following incumbent defeat. This study showed that "new" school boards selected "outsiders" to replace superintendents who left their positions subsequent to changes on the board. The third study dealt with predictors of incumbent defeat. The strongest predictors identified were (1) percentage change in assessed valuation eight years prior to the first defeat of an incumbent, (2) percentage change in average daily attendance in the three-year period prior to incumbent defeat, and (3) the ratio of votes against incumbents to total votes cast in the school board election immediately before the election in which an incumbent was defeated. (Author/JG)

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ANTECEDENTS TO INCUMBENT DEFEAT AND SUPERINTENDENT TURNOVER

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The research reported in this paper was conducted in southern California in the mid-1960's. The data collection period extended from 1951 through 1965, a period which seems almost remote, when one considers the political turmoil which the Nation has experienced since that time. In order to provide some perspective on the studies and the setting in which they were conducted, one must picture suburban southern California in the two decades subsequent to World War II.

Four southern California counties and 117 of their school districts provided the setting for the research. The data collection period included a time when all of the counties, and their many school districts, experienced rapid growths in population. It was the era of the G.I. tract home. Orange groves disappeared, replaced overnight, it seemed, with hundreds of houses straining unsuccessfully to look different from each other. Thousands of World War II veterans, and non-veterans as well, seeking the "good life", exited the large cities such as Los Angeles, and moved to the suburbs. In addition, large numbers of people packed their bags in the Midwest, East and South and moved West, motivated to some degree by some of the same reasons which provided California with population booms in earlier periods of the State's history.

Local school districts throughout the four-county area suddenly found themselves without adequate facilities and staff to house and serve mushrooming school enrollments. Double sessions, even triple sessions, were common. Bond

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issues and tax referenda repeatedly were approved by voters, anxious to provide classrooms for their children.

It was an era of population shifts as well as influxes. Many communities, which for years had had relatively stable and homogeneous populations, suddenly found themselves with strangers in their midst. The new people frequently differed from those who had lived most of their lives in the suburban cities and towns. Coming as they did not only from other parts of California, but also from throughout the nation, the newcomers often held different values and had different goals than the old-time residents and their leaders. School board members and superintendents who for years had quietly directed the educational programs in their school districts, began to find their policies, even their formal positions of leadership, challenged by the newcomers. Such challenges, when they occurred, not only threatened political incumbents in the usual sense of the term, but it also posed a similar problem for local superintendents.

Generally speaking, then, the setting for the studies were school districts which could be characterized as having enjoyed long periods of political stability, punctuated only occasionally with short periods of political unrest. Community populations were growing rapidly, values clashed and periods of political stability were becoming shorter. Political strife, shaped not only by conditions within communities, but also by forces at the state and national levels, increasingly was more common.

The studies focused on involuntary turnover in the superintendency as a consequence of the defeat for reelection of an incumbent school board member, the selection of a replacement for the outgoing chief school officer and on social and economic indicators which might be used to predict the defeat of incumbents for reelection to the board of education.

The theoretical framework for the studies can be stated briefly.[1] First, it was assumed that changing socio-economic conditions within a community would lead to changes in the values, aspirations and interests of that community. Second, it was assumed that a community's values, goals and interests would be reflected in the community's decision making structure, including the board of education. Third, it was assumed that changes in values, aspirations, and interests within a given community would tend to give rise to competition for control of the decision making processes of the community, including the school board. The superintendent was conceptualized as heavily involved in the local school district's policy making process. It was assumed, therefore, that the chief school officer would come to be closely identified with the incumbent members of the board of education and his position would be vulnerable should they suffer defeat. Perceived as an integral part of the policy making system of the school district, the superintendent would be threatened by control of that system passing into the hands of a new group.

Membership on boards of education change frequently, not only at election time, but between elections as well. An attempt was made to distinguish between conflict and non-conflict changes. It was assumed that vacancies which occurred on boards between elections and which were filled through appointment by the remaining board members would not constitute a shift in the political orientation of the board since it was likely that the appointing members would select for a colleague one who shared their values. Furthermore, it seemed logical to assume that changes in school board membership as a result of uncontested elections would not constitute a shift in the political orientation of the board. It was held that the in-group would not voluntarily abandon its seats on policy making bodies and that an emergent group would have to gain its seats by virtue of winning a contested election.

The defeat of one or more incumbent school board members for reelection was considered the clearest evidence of rejection of the old policy making system. Given the foregoing, one would expect to find significantly more turnover in the office of superintendent subsequent to school board elections in which incumbents were defeated than following elections in which no incumbents were unseated. Incumbent defeat also might be described as involuntary turnover on the school board. Therefore, if incumbent defeat signified rejection of the current policy making system and, if it was equally valid that the chief school officer was perceived as an integral member of that system, then it might be expected that involuntary turnover on the school board would be followed by involuntary turnover in the office of superintendent.

The nature of turnover was the central focus of the study. The initial test was to determine the significance of superintendent turnover subsequent to a change in the composition of the board of education. All 117 school districts in four southern California counties which had five-member school boards and which had not undergone any boundary changes between 1956 and 1965 were selected for the study. In each district, school board members were elected by popular vote and each superintendent was appointed to office by the board of education.

Data on all school board election and board membership changes as well as all changes in the superintendency were recorded. The initial analysis of the data on superintendent turnover and school board incumbent defeat left little doubt that a significant relationship existed between the two events. Significantly more turnover in the superintendency occurred after an incumbent school board member was defeated for reelection than occurred following the seating of school boards which had not undergone such a change. The relationship was significant at the .001 level.

A relationship also was demonstrated between the political instability of school districts and incumbent defeat. Following the procedure previously used by the Kammerer group in their study of the political role of the city manager,[2] superintendents who had assumed office following an incumbent board member's defeat were asked to render a judgment, by means of a questionnaire, on the stability of the politics of their school districts during their predecessor's tenure. Matching the responses of the superintendents to the question of political stability with the data regarding incumbent defeat gave an indication of the validity of using incumbent defeat as a reflection of the stability of school district politics. The respondents' responses were matched with the independently gathered election data and the resultant contingency stable clearly linked incumbent defeat to political instability in the school district. The significance was again at the .001 level.

The data strongly suggested that not only that defeat of incumbent school board members for reelection and political instability of school districts were related, but, also, that incumbent defeat is a reflection of a struggle for power between an emergent power clique and an incumbent group. In short, analyses of these data provided an indication of the validity of the theoretical basis of the study, i.e., changes in the value orientations of a community will in turn lead to a challenge of the incumbent power structure by an emergent group. Incumbent defeat, then, is both a result of and an indicator of this conflict.

The next step was to determine the nature of superintendent turnover. Involuntary turnover was conceptualized as instances where the superintendent was asked to leave, was dismissed, was not offered a contract renewal, or left because of conflict with the school board. Voluntary turnover was characterized as cases where the chief school officer retired or left the school district either with evidence of support from the board, or at least without evidence of conflict with the board.

Each case of superintendent turnover was classed as either voluntary or unvoluntary. Then these data were matched with the political stability of the school districts as described by the superintendent-respondents (Table 1).

TABLE 1

School District Political Stability and Superintendent Turnover

		Superintendent Turnover*	
		Vol.	Invol.
School District Political Stability	Stable	44	16
	Unstable	1	27

Chi Square = 36.18 N = 87

*One respondent did not reply to the question regarding political stability of the school district.

Involuntary turnover seemed clearly related to political instability. Significance was attained at the .001 level. It was of interest to note that in only a single instance did a respondent indicate voluntary turnover in the superintendency where political instability was indicated.

The second contingency table in this series matched voluntary-involuntary turnover with old school boards (boards in which no incumbents had been defeated) and new school boards (boards in which incumbents had been defeated) (Table 2). Significance was attained at the .01 level.

TABLE 2

Old and New School Boards and Superintendent Turnover

		Superintendent Turnover	
		Vol.	Invol.
School Boards	Old	31	15
	New	15	27

Chi Square = 8.818 N = 88

Thus, it appeared clear that where school district politics were rather stable, with few controversial policy questions to cause division in the community, school board members suffered few defeats in their bids for re-election, and superintendent turnover, when it occurred, was likely to be voluntary. In contrast, where political instability was evident incumbent defeat frequently occurred, and the chief school officer's leaving was apt to be involuntary.

Two more tests of the voluntary-involuntary data were made. In these tests only those instances of superintendent turnover were used in which there appeared to be no possibility of error in judgment on the voluntary-involuntary question. There were 54 such cases. The resultant tables produced chi square values which reached the .001 level of signficance. There seemed to be little question, then, that incumbent defeat and involuntary turnover in the superintendency were significantly related.

Incumbent defeat did appear to signal the representation of an emergent power structure on the school board. There was evidence that incumbent defeat was linked to controversies over policy questions. This suggests that values were in conflict and that old values, aspirations and political orientations were being challenged by new ones. In order for the new ones to be heard, thus having an effect upon the decision making processes of the school district, it seemed necessary to successfully challenge the incumbent power structure at the ballot box.

Further, the data strongly suggested that the chief school officer was perceived as a policy maker and as a member of the incumbent decision making structure. When the incumbent power group was challenged and defeated, the superintendent's position was vulnerable. More often than not, he departed.

A study parallel to the one just discussed looked at the succession patterns of superintendents in terms of the voluntary-involuntary turnover question.[3] It was hypothesized that when the chief school officer's departure from the school district was involuntary, then his successor would be an outsider. Contrariwise, it was expected that candidates from within the school district would stand a good chance of being selected as superintendent when the latter's departure was voluntary. The data confirmed the hypotheses, lending additional support to the theoretical basis for the studies. In this instance it was clear that a new power group represented on the school board desired as superintendent someone who was not identified with the old chief school officer and the establishment.

The final study to be discussed focused on social, economic and political indicators of future defeat for reelection of incumbent school board members.[4] It was hoped that if such indicators could be discovered, then unnecessary political conflict within school districts could be avoided. Community leaders might be alerted in advance to the necessity of changing programs and policies to meet emerging needs.

Thirty-seven of the southern California school districts previously studied were included in the research. In nineteen of the districts, no incumbent school board member had suffered defeat in a board election between 1952 and 1965. These districts were randomly selected. They were compared with eighteen school districts, all of the districts in the four counties in which an incumbent had been defeated in the 1961 election and in which the superintendency changed. (In eight of the districts, no incumbent experienced defeat between 1952 and 1961; in ten, there had been one or more incumbent defeats during that time.)

Three common descriptive characteristics of school districts were used in the study. They were: (1) average daily attendance, (2) assessed valuation and (3) number of votes cast for each candidate at school board elections. These characteristics represent data readily available to school boards and superintendents. Such data also may be representative of significant changes occurring within a given school district.

Average daily attendance indicates the size of a school district. Increases or decreases in average daily attendance represent changes in needs for staffing and facilities. Changes in average daily attendance also may reflect changes in land use; provide some indications of changes in population density, the average number of school-age children per capita and the ratio of the number of children attending public schools to the number attending private and parochial schools. Significant shifts in any of these have meaning for the educational values of a community.

Assessed valuation of property is a measure of the gross wealth of the school district. It is an indication of the district's financial capacity to meet the stress of changing programs. Changes in assessed valuation reflect changes in land use and assessment practice. These also reflect socio-economic conditions within a community. Assessed valuation per child in average daily attendance is even a stronger indication of the ability of a community to support its schools. Changes in assessed valuation per child in average daily attendance are probably good indicators of new building and change in land use, therefore suggesting changes in the social class composition of a school district's population.

Generally, school board elections provide models of voter apathy. In the four counties studied the vast majority of school boards were elected by small minorities of eligible voters. Small voter turnout is in part a reflection of the lack of organized opposition to the policies of the establishment. It was

hypothesized that a significant increase in ballots cast in a board of education election would result in a higher ratio of votes against incumbents and would precede the actual defeat of an incumbent.

A number of analyses were made of the data. Briefly, antecedent events to the defeats of incumbent board members in 1961 were revealed. The strongest predictors were: (1) the percentage change in assessed valuation over the three-year period, 1951-52 to 1954-55, (2) the percentage change in average daily attendance over the three-year period, 1956-57 to 1959-60 and (3) the ratio of votes against incumbents to total votes cast in the 1959 election. The change in assessed valuation occurred some eight years prior to the significant political shift in voting behavior.

The three studies briefly summarized above provide support for the theory of political change outlined earlier in the paper. Social and economic changes in a given community will be reflected in changes in the community's value structure. If the established order cannot adjust or change in response to changing needs and values in its community, then political action to bring about the desired changes will result. In the school district, incumbent defeat is the signal that a political shift is taking place. The superintendent, more often than not identified with the policies of the old regime, is vulnerable in such a circumstance. In all probability there will be a change in chief school officers. And, when a new superintendent sits with the school board, he will represent a different value orientation than did his predecessor.

The research summarized in this paper reflect a period in the politics of local school districts, a period in which political conflict was an exception. The politics of local school districts could be characterized as having long periods of stability, with occasional periods of instability, signalling an adjustment within the decision making structure to bring it more into line with

socio-economic conditions in the school district. There is no law which requires that there be long periods of political stability within a school district. School districts are not isolated from the larger society. It is clear that school boards and superintendents must and will respond not only to pressures from within their systems, but they also must respond to pressure from without. Political instability already has become a way of life in some school districts. It appears relatively safe to predict that in the future local school districts will experience more periods of political strife than did school districts in the past.

FOOTNOTES

[1]John C. Walden, "School Board Changes and Involuntary Superintendent Turnover." (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Claremont Graduate School, 1966), pp. 21-22. See, also, Laurence Iannaccone and Frank W. Lutz, Politics, Power and Policy: The Governing of Local School Districts. (Columbus: Charles E. Merrill, 1970), p. 97.

[2]Gladys M. Kammerer, et al., The Urban Political Community: Profiles in Town Politics. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963).

[3]Robert M. Freeborn, "School Board Changes and the Succession Patterns of Superintendents." (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Claremont Graduate School, 1966).

[4]Richard S. Kirkendall, "Discriminating Social Economic and Political Characteristics of Changing versus Stable Policy-Making Systems in School Districts." (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Claremont Graduate School, 1966). See, also, the discussion of this study in Iannaccone and Lutz, op. cit., pp. 96-103, from which much of the balance of this paper is drawn.